



## City of Seattle

### Advocacy

#### Introduction

Victim advocacy is a critical component of any domestic violence program, whether it is within a criminal justice system or a community system. Criminal justice advocates (represented here by the Seattle City Attorney's Office [SCADVU], the Seattle Police Department [SPD Gender and Age Crime Investigations Section] and volunteers from SPD's Victim Support Team [VST]), may differ from community based advocates in the way they work with victims of domestic violence, but their goals are the same: to "advocate" for the victim, to enhance victim safety, and to provide the victim with appropriate resources that will facilitate self determination and empowerment.

One primary area of concern is the difficult job criminal justice advocates have in balancing the needs and desires of the victim with the goals of the criminal justice system in which they work. It is clear that the role of the advocate is extensive, and in most cases, the advocate's work goes far beyond the typical job description. The advocate (SCADVU and SPD Gender and Age Crime Investigations Section) must:

- Listen carefully to the victim, assessing her situation (i.e., safety needs) while taking into account what will occur as a result of police investigation and a prosecutor's decision to file/not file criminal charges against the defendant (i.e., the victim may not want charges filed, may recant or minimize, etc.);
- Assist the victim with safety planning;
- Accompany the victim to court hearings (including assistance with interviews and preparation for trial); keep the victim updated on court dates and information;
- Provide and assist the victim with information about other legal remedies (including protection orders), victims' rights, community resources and referrals, crime victims' compensation,
- Work with police and prosecutors regarding victims' wishes and case action;
- Consult with other personnel who are working with the defendant (Department of Corrections, probation, etc.); and
- Work collaboratively with community-based advocates to address the full range of victim needs.

The Victim Support Team (VST) Program is a unique partnership between community and police to address and prevent domestic violence. VST has a more limited role in providing ongoing victim advocacy services, but play a critical role in providing a crisis response for victims at domestic violence crime scenes. Community volunteers with VST provide crisis intervention and support to domestic violence victims at secured crime scenes, a critical time following domestic violence incidents. The program is designed to address the gap in services to domestic violence victims between the time patrol officers respond to a call to the time advocates, detectives and prosecutors make contact with the victim for follow up. VST response has two parts:

1. Community volunteers provide on-scene crisis intervention to domestic violence victims in the time immediately following the domestic violence incident. Once the scene has been secured, patrol officers can call out the VST to assist on any domestic violence call where the officer is making a police incident report. (Safety precautions are assessed concerning scene safety for VST.) Volunteers work with a partner and are supported by an on-call supervisor. Teams are equipped with an unmarked police car, cell phone, pager, and police radio for communication with patrol officers in the field. The volunteer teams operate in the North and South Precincts during weekend hours.
2. A JustServe AmeriCorps volunteer provides some immediate follow up services, and also transfers the case to a criminal justice system legal advocate for ongoing services. After the



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weekend hours, the JustServe AmeriCorps member provides follow up calls to domestic violence victims who were assisted by the VST. The AmeriCorps member assists victims with safety planning, help locate emergency resources, make referrals to community resources, and help obtain criminal justice system information such as offender jail release time and protection order information.

VST has access to a number of emergency resources such as:

- The Emergency Feeding Program, which provides VST with bags of non-perishable food, including dietary-specific bags for diabetics and Asian diets;
- Stuffed animals that VST staff can give to children of victims during an intervention;
- Blankets, formula, diapers, and pacifiers for babies and toddlers;
- Gift cards/certificates to victims for Fred Meyer, Safeway, QFC, or McDonalds;
- Free cell phones for victims who need them; and
- Transportation to hospitals, safe housing, and animal shelters for pets if a victim needs to leave her residence and cannot take animals with her.

### Recent developments

#### The Seattle City Attorney's Domestic Violence Unit (SCADVU)

In November 2003 the City Attorney, Tom Carr, issued a Policy Statement regarding domestic violence prosecution and advocacy, partially based on findings of the Domestic Violence Safety and Accountability Audit, a safety study conducted in 2002-03 with a consultant from the Battered Women's Justice Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota. As a result of this work:

- The SCADVU staff has divided into subcommittees to work on protocols and procedures needed to implement the goals of the Policy Statement
- SCADVU staff meet regularly as one large group to discuss and finalize these protocols
- SCADVU advocates have developed a victim safety inventory instrument as recommended by the Safety Audit. The SCADVU tool was developed by taking certain elements from various danger/risk assessment models and incorporating them into one instrument applicable for use by the SCADVU advocates
- SCADVU attorneys have developed a special protocol to prosecute domestic violence "High Risk Offenders."

#### Seattle Police Department's Gender and Age Crime Investigations Section (SPD)

In 1999, using federal grant funds two domestic violence victim advocate positions were co-located with detectives in the Gender and Age Crime Investigations Section to provide better communications on cases. In 2004 the positions were sustained in SPD. In addition, the roles have been extended to include coordination with the King County Prosecutor's Office, Domestic Violence Unit and availability during the week to respond in the field to domestic violence incidents.

#### Seattle Police Department's Victim Support Team (SPD VST)

The City Domestic Violence Assessment found underutilization of the VST. In response, a roll call training effort to increase awareness of the VST's role has resulted in significant increased call outs. The hope is that the role of VST will be solidified by educating patrol officers on the value of VST and its services to victims.

VST is also working with SPD administration to make it mandatory for officers to use VST on all DV incidents occurring while VST teams are in service. This should result in 100% victim response during the weekend with immediate on-scene intervention and support by a trained advocate.



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## **Conclusion**

The action plan that follows includes clarifying and solidifying the role of the victim advocate across the criminal justice system. This plan identifies tools to help facilitate the advocates' work and introduces a comprehensive City advocacy service plan, which will also include community advocacy work, service linkages and collaboration.

**Cross Reference of Other Strategic Issues:** Prosecution Plan, Victim Defendants, and Investigations.